

## **The Role of Language in the Survival of a Culture**

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the role of language in the survival of a culture. Scholars believe that a language is the identity of an individual, a society, or a country. It contains in itself emotions, thought and values. In other words, a language is the vehicle of a culture. As we know the language, we know the culture. The growth of a culture largely depends on the development of its language. If we separate a language from its culture, the latter becomes obscure. It so happens because language is a tool that develops in human beings the ability to understand and explore a culture. Therefore, the existence of any culture cannot be imagined without language.

**Keywords:** Relationship between Language and Culture, Importance of a language

### **Introduction**

Along the process of evolution of human civilization and culture, language has always played an important role. It is intimately related to culture as the most effective means of communication. This fact cannot be denied that culture needs words to express itself. If words are properly chosen and appropriately spoken, they exhibit the culture in an effective manner.

Language is a device of forming, saving and transferring thoughts, ideas and knowledge of any culture from one generation to another. For example, in India, English culture is still surviving

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concomitantly with multiple Indian cultures because of English language. A large number of Indian population love to dream, think, meditate and communicate in English language and exhibit English culture on various occasions like New-year, Valentine's Day and birthdays etc. Scholars believe that diaspora of any language community not only makes alive its culture, it also inspires other cultures to mingle in itself. Just to understand the deep relationship of language with culture, first of all we must know what a language is.

A famous American poet and existentialist, Walt Whitman, says, "Language is not an abstract construction of the learned, or of dictionary makers, but is something arising out of the work, needs, ties, joys, affections, tastes, of long generations of humanity, and has its bases broad and low, close to the ground."

It is a fact that a culture requires a language to promote its ideas, norms and customs in a social context. However, the structure of a language is not constant. It changes according to the demand of time and space. David Crystal suggests, "Language is the repository of the history of a people. It is their identity. Oral testimony, in the forms of sagas, folktales, songs, rituals, proverbs, and many other practices, provide us with a unique canon of literature". As we find the varieties of culture, we find the varieties of languages too. As every culture has different norms and mores, every language has different sounds, structure semantics and forms as well. Such factors emphasize the fact that human beings have created languages to express their ideas, emotions and imagination according to their typical cultural behavior.

Another significant factor of a language is that a child cries, smiles, crawls and walks naturally but he acquires language within a social context where he grows up. If a Chinese child grows up in the U.S. A., he speaks English instead of Chinese. It is possible that he is comfortable with Chinese culture more than American Culture but it is also true that he is more comfortable with English language than the Mandarin. Actually, to express, emotions, feelings, imagination and anger human beings need a means. Language plays that role very well and gives internal satisfaction. In other words, language is a key to satisfaction. In the words of Sapir: "Language is a purely human and non- instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions, and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols. These symbols are, in the first instance, auditory and they are produced by the so-called 'organs of speech.'" The words of Sapir proof that, it is the language which brings human groups together and turns groups into a society. Perhaps

Chomsky's most relevant work for a discussion on language is his 1976 paper, "On the Nature of Language." In it, Chomsky directly addresses the meaning of language that, "The nature of language is considered as a function of knowledge attained... The language faculty may be regarded as a fixed function, characteristic of the species, one component of the human mind." Today, most of the scholars agree with Chomsky's opinion because in our contemporary digital and global society, bilingual or multilingual candidates attain more knowledge of other cultures and get more job opportunities around the world.

With the reference of English language, we can understand this fact in the most appropriate way. In our global village, people are moving from one place to another for several reasons like academic commercial and medical, but in all those cases English is their principal tool of communication. By using it, people are able to develop an understanding, and contact with one another regarding their matters. Because it is not possible for people to learn and understand all languages and cultures most people around the world accept English as their common language. Thus, English assists people of different cultures to communicate and understand one another.

As we know most countries of the world are dealing with China for commercial purposes, Saudi Arabia' is one of them. Just to alleviate the language issue, Saudi government has made the Mandarin part of their school syllabii and they believe that knowledge of Mandarin will assist Saudi people to develop a profound relation with China.

**Relationship between Culture and language:** A close look at the language and culture relationship will bring out that formation of any culture heavily relies on a language. Martin believes, "language is one of the several ways to identified culture." On the contrary Taylor gives an effective definition of culture to the world where he writes, "Culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.( Taylor 1924 (orig.1871):.

According to many scholars, culture means some particular standards of a particular society that endow peculiarity to it. As India, is famous for classical dance like- Kathak, Kacchipodi and Odessi, and the United States, is famous for its hip-hop. Musical instruments and postures used in India are different from those used in the U.S., while the poetry, style and instruments used by the whirling Durvishes in Konia are typical of Turkish tradition. The language is the most distinctive feature of all of them, apart from costumes and concepts. For Jiang (2000) "Language is the mirror of culture in the

sense that people can see a culture through its language. Most scholars agree with Jiang because language is the most appropriate tool which can display any particular culture in various forms.

According to scholars, “Language can be viewed as a verbal expression of culture. It is used to maintain and convey culture and cultural ties. Language provides us with many of the categories we use for expression of our thoughts, so it is therefore natural to assume that our thinking is influenced by the language which we use.” We agree that language provides us with many of its manifestations in the field of communication a language may assume various forms, like-debate, discussion, dialogue, conversation, conference, discourse and consultation. In written form language has several ways to express culture like prose, poetry, songs, ballads and rhymes. In literary form we can see cultures in novels, drama, essays, stories and scripts of a particular place. It is due to the language of ancient times that the classical scriptures represent age old cultures in our contemporary era.

It is also a fact, that a language is not contained only in communicative and written forms. It can demonstrate its prowess and wonders in audio and visual as well. For example, we can watch various European cultures of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in some old movies. The speech of Hitler during Second World War can be listened to even today in audio or video forms. In all those movies and audio and visual clips there remain preserved not only slices of amazing history, but also an extraordinary wealth of old cultures.

It is due to the language of ancient times that the classical scriptures represent the age-old cultures in our contemporary era. Therefore, Franz asserts that, “Language is a reflex of culture and that there are everywhere linguistic devices that enable the language to follow the demands of culture.” Thus, we can say that language is not only the repository of a culture, it is also the mirror that exposes all dimensions of a culture and imparts it longevity.

### **Importance of language:**

Cultural importance of language can be seen in the following aspects:

#### *Thought and concepts:*

Whatever the people of a particular culture imagine, or think cannot be expressed but only with the assistance of a language. This is the reason why we have literature in all languages and there is culture in every literature. For example, some Shakespearean plays display his deep interest in the Roman culture, whereas in the Keats’ poetry we see a lot of the Greek culture. Likewise, in

Wordsworth's poetry we get the culture of the common man with a natural flavor. Thus, we can say that culture can be seen in language in form of literature.

*Social identity:*

Language is man's identity. People recognize a particular person's culture through the language he/she speaks. For Edward Sapir, language is not only a vehicle for the expression of thoughts, perceptions, sentiments and values characteristic of a community; it also presents a fundamental expression of social identity.

*Subduing Xenophobia:*

Many linguists believe that language is an apparatus that keeps the feeling of xenophobia away from us. For example, consider the English language. At many places in the world IELTS or TOFEL is a prerequisite for admission in various academic programs or immigration to different countries. One needs to score a specific band to prove one's proficiency in English. These language proficiency tests are particularly useful for the countries where English is the L1. It is rightly believed that a foreign student or immigrant moving to an English-speaking country with an adequate IELTS or TOFEL score, would be culturally more comfortable with the people of his host country. He would not have any anxiety or fear of communication either.

*Ability to express:*

In today's shrinking world, multilingualism is a highly desired bliss. People are rapidly moving from one country or linguistic region to another. Their knowledge of any additional language comes handy to them. If a person knows even some basic phrases of the language of the country where he/she is, such little knowledge becomes a cause of great understanding between him/her and the people of the foreign land.

*Transference of culture:*

As we know language has several functions in a society. One of its important roles we can mention here is that of transferring the norms of one culture to another. The influence of Muslim

Indian culture can be clearly seen on Hindi speaking communities, and vice-versa. Both Hindu and Muslim communities are distinct in India in many ways, but still they share innumerable cultural norms, customs and values in common. For example, their marriage ceremonies are a great deal identical. They even share their religious terminologies like, “*Dan and Punn*” and “*Sadaqa and Khairat*.” One of the significant ways in which these cultures enrich each other are their languages.

*Preserving history:*

When we read literature of any place, we gather information about the culture of that period. We get such knowledge in movies that tell us the tales of a particular time in history. The history of the French Revolution, for instance, and the role of the Church and the French Nobility in the social context of the time, are all preserved in various languages.

*Changing perspectives:*

Knowledge of a language always helps people to change their perspective of a culture. When we encounter a foreign culture, we cannot fully comprehend its nuances except by a good understanding of the language that the people of that culture speak. This phenomenon can be understood with the example of the criticism that the Saudi culture suffers. Often Western expatriates in the Kingdom disapprove the strictly stratified society of the Islamic people in Saudi Arabia. However, as some of the foreign workers begin to gain knowledge of Arabic and increase their interaction with the local people, their perspective of the Arab culture changes significantly, and their criticism also becomes milder.

*Assistance with global communication:*

We often see that polyglots have an extraordinary ability to develop a strong relationship with people of various cultures. Moreover, the knowledge of more than one language provides the speaker a lot of confidence. They can move in the global society with a greater ease. In other words, the knowledge of various languages helps us as to how to behave naturally in a culture where we would be complete strangers otherwise.

*Assistance with international commerce:*

The knowledge of various languages assists people to contact one another for commercial purposes in a cross-cultural context. Everywhere in the world people are negotiating with one another in their non-native languages, such as English, Arabic and Chinese. As I mentioned earlier, the Saudi government is considering adding Mandarin to the national curriculum. The reason behind this step is Saudi Arabia's huge commercial dependence on China. In today's world, to increase their market share and sales, companies tend to employ teams of multilingual people. The knowledge of many languages is paramount if we wish to prevail on the world market.

**Conclusion:**

At the end, we can say all factors mentioned above highlight the significance and demand of a language for the existence of a culture and a society. A language provides a culture with several tools to exhibit all its dimensions. Language is a great boon that helps shape, preserve and augment a culture. Though the structure of a language is not always constant. It changes with the passage of time. Today, in the digital world, we are using symbols and short words. But it is also a fact that in any shape every culture and every society there is always a need for a language. Brown (1994:165) describes the two as follows: 'A language is a part of a culture and a culture is a part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture.

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